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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003465

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SUBJECT: CANDIDATE CHAVEZ CONTINUES TO THREATEN PRESS

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Classified By: Daniel Lawton, A/Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: This press freedom report focuses on President Chavez's threats to Venezuela's independent media related to the December 3 presidential election. In response to media reporting of Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez's threats to PDVSA managers to support the Chavez re-election campaign, Chavez threatened to withdraw opposition media broadcast licenses in early 2007. Chavez later suggested the BRV should close down media outlets and jail persons responsible for any "destabilizing" broadcasts on election day. The military that guards the presidential mansion attacked November 23 an independent television team covering a housing protest there. The International Association of Radiodifusion (AIR) criticized Chavez's intimidation of the media November 14. A November 23 pro-government editorial accused several specific journalists and media outlets of colluding to undermine the upcoming election. END SUMMARY

CHAVEZ THREATENS TO PULL LICENSES

¶2. (SBU) President Chavez has threatened independent media outlets a number of times since June. Most recently, Chavez made similar threats in connection with the December 3 presidential elections, saying he would pull the transmission licenses of any outlet that "continues" to conspire against his government. Director of the Central Office of the International Association of Radiodifusion (AIR) Santiago Del Pino expressed concern over Chavez's comments. Del Pino visited Venezuela November 14 as part of AIR's program of monitoring freedom of expression and the work of media companies in the weeks before upcoming elections. Del Pino concluded that concerns previously voiced by organizations such as SIP regarding the imperiled state of free expression in the BRV are valid (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) Chavez once again threatened television station owners on November 17. He said he would hold them responsible for opinions of those interviewed on their programs. Chavez said that anybody who espouses violence on air or calls for the military to rise up against the government would find themselves in jail "as soon as they walk out of the station." Reasserting that the opposition media harbors intentions to destabilize the country during

elections, Chavez threatened, "don't make me take drastic actions, because I will have no reservations whatsoever to safeguard the sovereignty of the country." He warned the Armed Forces on November 17 of plans circulating on the Internet to "destabilize" the electoral process on December 3 and ordered that the Armed Forces close any television station that emits such messages of "terrorism, hate, war," or calls to disavow the results of the elections.

¶4. (SBU) Chavez also criticized media outlets on November 2 for playing the video surreptitiously taken of Energy Minister and PDVSA head Rafael Ramirez demanding that PDVSA managers support Chavez's re-election campaign. Chavez expressed full support for Ramirez's actions and instead blamed the private media for generating the controversy surrounding Ramirez. He likened such behavior to promoting another coup d'etat and suggested that he may withdraw television stations' licenses in early 2007.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

¶5. (U) Venezuelans suffering from the acute housing shortage have regularly assembled outside Miraflores and La Casona (Chavez's principal office and residence, respectively) to protest the BRV's failure to adequately address the situation. When opposition television channel Globovision attempted to cover such a gathering on November 23, several soldiers from Chavez's Presidential Military Detail (Casa Militar) reportedly attacked the cameraman, throwing him to the ground and kicking him repeatedly. When the police arrived, the guard force reportedly assured them that the protesters, not the Presidential Guard, had assaulted the camera crew. Video and photographic evidence suggests otherwise.

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MORE MUD-SLINGING

¶6. (U) Ministry of Interior and Justice Vice Minister Yuri Pimental alleged on October 28 that certain media outlets are working to ignite street protests in an effort to destabilize the pre-electoral environment. In response to seemingly innocuous reporting on prison hunger strikes, Pimental accused the independent media of altering reality, both in the prisons and in the entire country, in an effort to swing undecided voters against the government. Certain media, said Pimental, are engaging in tactics to "generate crises where they do not exist."

¶7. (U) The pro-government newspaper "Vea" published an editorial November 23 entitled "The Media Coup," claiming that the opposition has lost all of its momentum, and only the independent media remains in its corner. The editorial argues that the independent media, including major dailies "El Universal" and "El Nacional" and several named regional publications are doing the bidding of major opposition figures who have "hijacked" Manuel Rosales's campaign. Finally, the editorial asserted without evidence that the independent media is the force behind a movement to undermine and disavow the results of the election.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Venezuela's private media currently faces a dual threat from Hugo Chavez as both the sitting President and as the front-running re-election candidate. In recent weeks, as the Rosales campaign has gained momentum, Candidate Chavez has linked his regular diatribes against an independent media to the election. He conveniently tars independent reporting

by labeling any news that does not spread the Bolivarian gospel as potentially destabilizing. At the same time, President Chavez has the authority to make good on his threats to close media outlets on election day or to withdraw broadcasting licenses in the future. Such threats could be intended to inhibit media coverage of potential electoral fraud on December 3.

WHITAKER